From Image Narcissism to Autopoetic Narcissism:

Generative AI and Private Economies of Self-Attention

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Abstract

This text sketches a genealogy of attention in contemporary media societies, from the modern public sphere to what I call **autopoetic narcissism**: a regime in which the subject becomes both self-producer and self-consumer of an aesthetic universe made "in their own image", thanks to generative AI.

Starting from Habermas' theory of the public sphere, the notion of attention as a scarce resource in the "attention economy", Castells' "mass self-communication", Pariser's "filter bubble" and Byung-Chul Han's critique of the expulsion of alterity, I argue that generative AI opens a further stage. To name this stage I propose the concepts of **poetic self-bubbles**, **delegated autopoiesis** and **private economies of self-attention**.

The extreme hypothesis guiding the essay is simple and disquieting: what happens to attention, and to the very idea of a public sphere, when each person has their own film, their own music, their own images and narratives generated for them, to the point where other people's attention becomes almost unreachable and the main attention one receives is one's own, organized by machines?

1. Introduction: from attention as a resource to self-attention as destiny

For some time now we have lived in what is widely called an **attention economy**: a regime in which platforms, media and devices compete fiercely to capture and retain human attention. In conditions of informational overabundance, attention becomes a scarce resource and the key "currency" of digital capitalism. Interfaces, notifications, persuasive design and recommendation algorithms are all calibrated with one goal: to keep us there, looking.

At the same time, our societies are often labelled **narcissistic**. We know the diagnosis: omnipresent selfies, exhibition of the body, endless search for likes and external validation. The body and the image become everyday forms of identity and recognition. This "narcissism of the image" has little to do with the complexity of the myth of Narcissus, but the term has stuck.

Generative AI introduces another turn of the screw. The question is no longer only *how do I show myself to others?* but *what kind of world can be produced around me, tailored to my desires?* These systems no longer merely filter or recommend content; they **generate content** to measure. Personalization ceases to be a matter of selecting from a pre-existing stock of cultural objects and becomes the algorithmic **production of works that feel like one's own**.

Music generated for my mood. Images that correspond to my aesthetic fantasies. Stories and texts that adapt to my biography and my preferences. In this context, a new kind of narcissism appears, one that no longer revolves only around the body and the visible self, but around a **world of works that mirror the self**.

What I want to defend in this essay is that generative AI makes possible a regime that can be described as **autopoetic narcissism** and that this regime fits within a broader genealogy of attention. The central figure is that of the subject as **self-producer and self-consumer** of a universe of works generated from themselves and for themselves. The broader hypothesis is that this regime tends towards **private economies of self-attention**: small aesthetic worlds where the main attention each person receives is the attention they give to themselves, mediated by machines.

2. Public sphere, attention and personalization: a brief genealogy

Habermas famously described the emergence of the **bourgeois public sphere** as a space of rational discussion among private individuals about matters of common concern, linked to the press, coffee houses, clubs and parliaments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That public sphere presupposed at least a partially shared world: common topics, common references, common stages.

Later, Habermas himself diagnosed the **structural transformation** of that public sphere: colonized by market logics, commercialized and reduced to a space of consumption rather than critical deliberation. Advertising and publicity became central, and the attention of citizens turned into a target for manipulation.

From another angle, the literature on the **attention economy** conceptualizes human attention as a limited resource to be distributed across overloaded information markets. The more time we spend connected, the more data we generate and the more value can be extracted from our presence. Attention becomes a productive input.

Within this broad history we can sketch, in a very schematic way, several phases:

- A time in which attention was concentrated in a **common public sphere**, even if limited and unequal.
- The era of **mass media**, with a few senders (radio, television, big newspapers) and millions of spectators.
- The advent of the **internet and networks**, which fragmented audiences into thematic communities and niches.
- The consolidation of platforms and **algorithmic personalization**, with feeds tuned to our tastes and social graphs.

None of this is new. What I propose is to add two further phases to this story and to understand the most recent one as explicitly **autopoetic** and centred on self-attention.

3. Niches, bubbles and mass self-communication

The first great fracture of the mass public came with early internet cultures: forums, blogs, mailing lists, small communities. The great audience was broken into **niches**. The important thing was no longer to reach the whole nation or the entire television audience, but to find "your people": fans, subcultures, micro-publics.

Castells described this as **mass self-communication**: communication with a potentially massive reach, but whose content is produced, selected and disseminated by individuals or small groups through horizontal networks. The subject is no longer only a consumer of media; they become a producer, curator and distributor.

Later, with the emergence of large platforms, this fragmented space was reorganized by algorithms. The concept of the **filter bubble** captured a key intuition: social networks and search engines, in the name of relevance, progressively filter what we see so that it fits our prior preferences and social environment. We see, like and share what looks like us and what our group already shares. The risk is an ecosystem of information and opinion that is comfortable but closed, with strong tendencies to isolation and polarization.

The public sphere becomes less a common stage and more an **archipelago of bubbles**. Attention, in this setting, is still essentially social: we want to be seen, recognised, followed; we compete for the attention of others inside our bubble.

4. Han and the "hell of the same"

Byung-Chul Han has given perhaps one of the most suggestive diagnoses of the contemporary subject. In works such as *The Burnout Society* he describes a regime of positivity and self-exploitation in which victim and perpetrator coincide: we exploit ourselves in the name of performance and self-realization. At the same time, he claims that the other, the genuinely different, is progressively expelled and replaced by **variations of the self**.

The world, in Han's account, becomes a sort of **mirror room**: we move among reflections of ourselves and of what we are already, in a "hell of the same" where alterity disappears. The problem is not repression from outside but saturation from within.

Although Han does not write specifically about generative AI, his description fits surprisingly well the logic of systems that keep showing us what we already like, what already resonates with us, what confirms us. The filter bubble is not only informational; it is also **affective and aesthetic**. We inhabit worlds that return our own image to us in multiple forms.

What generative AI does is to radicalize this possibility: instead of merely selecting among pre-existing contents, the system can produce **new contents that are nonetheless variations of the same**. It is no longer only my past clicks that shape my present feed; it is my explicit prompts and preferences that conjure up new texts, images, sounds, worlds for me.

5. Autopoiesis and delegated autopoiesis

The term **autopoiesis** originates in biology (Maturana and Varela) and was later adapted by Luhmann to social systems. In very brief terms, an autopoietic system is one that produces and reproduces its own components and maintains its organization through its own operations. An autopoietic social system (for example, the legal system) reproduces itself through communications that refer to other communications, in a closed loop.

It would be abusive to say that the contemporary subject is autopoietic in that strict sense. The individual is not a closed system that produces all its own conditions of existence. But the concept is useful to name something else: the tendency to **organize a world from one's own operations**, to surround oneself with communications, objects and works that derive primarily from oneself.

In the context of generative AI I propose the idea of **delegated autopoiesis**:

> A regime in which a subject delegates to technical systems the ongoing production of a symbolic environment that reproduces and reinforces their own patterns of preference, affect and identity.

The system that is truly autopoietic, in the strong sense, would be the macro-infrastructure of platforms and models that continuously ingest data and generate outputs. But from the subject's point of view what appears is a world that seems to be **self-generated**: the more I interact, the more the environment adapts to me; the more I feed it, the more "mine" it feels.

Delegated autopoiesis is not neutral. It is functional to platform capitalism, or if one prefers, to contemporary forms of technofeudalism. The more the subject becomes enclosed in a generative self-bubble, the more stable and predictable their patterns of attention and consumption become. The result is an extremely efficient loop for extracting time, data and, ultimately, money.

6. Phase 5 – Generative AI and poetic self-bubbles (proposal)

With this framework, I can now formulate the step I am interested in. I will call **Phase 5** the regime of **poetic self-bubbles** and **autopoetic narcissism**. To understand what is specific about it, it is useful to distinguish it from a preceding Phase 4.

- **Phase 4** would be that of platforms that generate **injective content** ad hoc for each user: advertising messages, news items, videos or texts produced automatically, in real time, to maximize engagement or persuasion. The user here is fundamentally a receiver: content is generated *for* them, but not *by* them.

- **Phase 5** appears when the user wants not just to receive hyper-personalized content, but to **enjoy their status as symbolic author** of what they consume. The pleasure lies in being able to say: this film is "mine", this music has been made "for me and from me", this narrative or these

images bear my signature in some way.

We move, therefore, from passive hyper-personalization to what we might call **generative narcissism**. The subject does not only ask the machine for another recommendation; they ask it to **co-create** with them, to produce an environment that reflects their tastes, their fantasies, their biography.

Here the notion of **autopoetic narcissism** comes in. Contemporary narcissism has often been described as an obsession with body and image: the selfie, the cult of the form, the constant search for external validation. Generative AI displaces this towards the **work**:

- "My" film, with the rhythm, tone and characters I want.
- "My" soundtrack, modulated to my moods.
- "My" images, that fulfil my aesthetic and erotic fantasies.
- "My" life story, rewritten and stylized.

The self not only shows itself; **it contemplates itself in symbolic products generated from itself**. The world becomes a sort of aesthetic echo chamber of the "I".

At this point the genealogy of media acquires a specific form:

- Phase 0 – Modern public sphere (Habermas): common spaces of discussion and visibility.
- Phase 1 – Mass media: few senders, many receivers.
- Phase 2 – Early internet and niches: proliferation of thematic communities.
- Phase 3 – Platforms and algorithmic bubbles: personalization of the shared world.
- Phase 4 – Generative platforms and injective content: contents produced automatically for each user, without

requiring any creative function from them.

- Phase 5 – Generative AI and poetic self-bubbles: the subject as self-producer and self-consumer of a universe of works made in their image.

The novelty of Phase 5 is not simply "more personalization". It is the reconfiguration of the relation between subject, work and public: **self-production and self-consumption tend to coincide in a single gesture**.

Delegated autopoiesis gives this gesture its technical and economic infrastructure. While the subject experiences the process as aesthetic self-attention, the underlying loop is more prosaic:

subject → data → model → content → more data → …

The cycle is closed and fed by every interaction. The more the subject encloses themselves in their generative self-bubble, the more the system learns, predicts and refines, and the easier it becomes to capture their time and their micro-payments. Autopoetic narcissism, seen from this angle, is not an escape from the system but **its refined and extreme form**.

The extreme hypothesis: micro-spheres of self-attention

We can now formulate the extreme hypothesis. Let us imagine that generative AI becomes trivial, cheap and omnipresent; that each individual has access to:

- a personal film generator,
- a music generator tuned to their tastes and states,
- an image generator for their preferred aesthetics and fantasies,
- a narrative generator that produces stories, dialogues and characters adapted to their biography.

Let us remember that each person's time is finite. In an attention economy, every minute spent on one thing is a minute not spent on something else.

Under these conditions it becomes plausible to conceive of the following limit case:

> **Each individual lives in a micro-sphere of aesthetic experience in which most of the works they consume have been produced for them, from their own data, by AI systems.**

In such a scenario:

1. **Competition for others' attention** becomes structurally difficult. If everyone has access to an almost infinite buffet of works that are theirs, why would they devote time to other people's works?

2. The main attention each subject receives is **their own**: an attention organized by machines that produce pleasant or interesting variations of their self and their world.

3. The public sphere does not simply fragment into niches and bubbles; it disintegrates into **poetic self-bubbles**: micro-universes in which the fundamental relation is *self ↔ environment generated for the self*.

This is not a literal prediction but a **limit tendency** that makes certain lines of development visible. It allows us to think what it would mean for a culture if the question "who is looking at me?" ceased to be central and was replaced by another, more interior: "how do I organize a world in which I can keep looking at myself?".

7. Normative and political implications (sketch)

The figure of autopoetic narcissism and poetic self-bubbles raises at least three broad questions.

First: **what remains of the public sphere?** If subjects retreat into micro-spheres of self-attention, the possibility of a shared space of deliberation and conflict is weakened even

further. The problem is not just the polarization between bubbles, but the simple impossibility of common experience: too many worlds, each too tailored to each self.

Second: **what kind of subjectivity emerges?** In continuity with Han, the subject of self-bubbles may be an exhausted self, unable to tolerate alterity, fleeing into environments of algorithmically generated positivity and auto-affirmation. A self that finds the frictions of the world unbearable and chooses instead to live in smooth, self-reflective surfaces.

Third: **what forms of resistance or ecology are conceivable?** To move from an "attention economy" to an **ecology of attention** would mean, perhaps, limiting personalization, re-introducing friction and preserving spaces where the unexpected, the conflictual and the not-made-for-me can appear. It might also mean politicizing the infrastructures of delegated autopoiesis: who controls the models, who profits from the data, where are the off-switches?

These questions point to a research and political program: taking seriously the possibility of private economies of self-attention, not to resign ourselves to them, but to understand what they are doing to our capacity to share a world.

8. Conclusion: contributions and the quiet shift in the question

The proposal developed here can be summarized in several points.

1. A **genealogy in six phases** of media and attention, adding to existing narratives two distinct stages of generative capitalism: one of injective content produced automatically for each user, and another of poetic self-bubbles in which the subject enjoys being the symbolic author of what they consume.

2. The concept of **autopoetic narcissism**, which shifts the focus from body-image narcissism to a regime in which the self is surrounded by works generated from itself and for

itself.

3. The idea of **poetic self-bubbles** and **private economies of self-attention**, in which the main attention each person receives is their own, technologically organized.

4. The notion of **delegated autopoiesis**, which names the way in which the production of the symbolic environment is outsourced to corporate infrastructures that stabilize and exploit patterns of attention.

5. The articulation of **self-production = self-consumption as a central loop** in platform capitalism: generative AI not only as a creative tool, but as a machine for enclosing subjects in worlds that feel like "theirs" while extracting data and time.

The image with which I would like to close is deliberately simple.

If the attention economy began as a struggle for the gaze of the many upon a few, it may end up fragmented into millions of small temples where each person looks at themselves, assisted by machines. It will not, perhaps, be the end of politics or of art, but it will be a silent shift in the question that organizes our culture: no longer "Who is looking at me?", but "How do I fabricate a world in which I can keep looking at myself, in mirrors and pools that I have built myself?"